

SOCRATES:

The Athenian philosopher Socrates was one of the most important thinkers of ancient Greece. Largely known through the writings of his student, [Plato](#), and his contemporary, the noted historian [Xenophon](#), Socrates is credited with exercising a pivotal influence on the future of Western philosophy.

The son of a well-off Athenian—probably a sculptor or stonemason—named Sophroniscus and a midwife named Phaenarete, Socrates was born in 470 [BCE](#) in Athens, Greece. His family enjoyed a high social status, as his father was reportedly a close friend of the son of [Aristides the Just](#), founder of the alliance of Greek city-states known as the [Delian League](#). At a young age, Socrates reportedly worked alongside his father and was socially connected with a group of leading [Athenians](#) who made up the intellectual community known as the Periclean circle.

It is believed that Socrates served as a [hoplite](#), or heavy infantryman, during the [Peloponnesian War](#), after which he was decorated for bravery. During his military career, Socrates reportedly distinguished himself with his powers of endurance, which included withstanding considerable fatigue as well as harsh climates. His ability to withstand all manner of external circumstances played a part in the development of his philosophy as well.

Later in life, Socrates married Xanthippe, who was described in the works of Xenophon as a woman with a temper and by others as a shrew. It has also been said that Socrates had a second wife named Myrta, but that has never been confirmed. Most likely with Xanthippe, Socrates is believed to have had three sons: Lamprocles, Sophroniscus, and Menexenus.

It is not known who Socrates' teachers were, but it is believed that he studied the written works of [Heraclitus](#), [Parmenides](#), and [Anaxagoras](#), among others. According to Plato, who told of Socrates' supposed corresponding speech in his *Apology*, Socrates—at age 40—was officially named the wisest man in Greece by the [Oracle at Delphi](#). During that time, Socrates became steadfast in his pursuit of knowledge as it pertained to the ethics of human life and conduct. He reportedly came to believe that by gaining such knowledge and helping others to do the same, he could effect the moral and intellectual improvement of Athenian society.

In seeking knowledge, Socrates developed unique methods and philosophies, for which he drew much criticism during his life, but which also served to make him an icon after his death. His method of dialectics, also known as the Socratic method, was based on cross-examination as a way to uncover inconsistencies in the assumptions inherent in other questions. He believed that by revealing underlying false assumptions, one could provide the means to form truthful conclusions. While that method helped his students to discover inconsistencies in their own morals or beliefs, it was met by strong resistance from many established thinkers of the time; many were offended by the thought of discovering inconsistencies in their own, already established, work.

Socrates also held that the soul is the source of moral character and that the manifestation of all virtue is tied into knowing one's true self. It then followed that knowledge and virtue were the same, which led to the belief that virtue, in and of itself, could not be taught. That belief went against the practice of the [Sophists](#) of the time, who attempted to teach virtue through teaching rhetoric. In addition, Socrates continued to believe that external circumstances, including material goods, were unimportant to a person's ultimate happiness. He himself neglected his financial affairs to the extent that he ended up relatively poor.

Socrates' many unique beliefs served to make him many enemies. He was ridiculed by the playwright [Aristophanes](#) in the play *The Clouds*, and he was eventually accused by a number of leading Athenian thinkers of corrupting the youth of the city. Then, in 399 BCE, a young Athenian named Meletus led a charge to prosecute Socrates for being—according to Plato's *Apology*—"a doer of evil, who corrupts the youth; and who does not believe in the gods of the state, but has other new divinities of his own." Against a backdrop of unrelated political turmoil that followed the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, Socrates was tried and convicted by a jury of Athenians. Socrates was determined to accept the will of his government and remain true to his beliefs; rather than opting to pay a fine to secure his release or taking advantage of an opportunity to escape, Socrates drank hemlock and died.

Although Socrates himself did not leave any written works, his pupil Plato wrote about him rather extensively. He gave dramatic accounts of the trial and death of Socrates in *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, and he also wrote numerous dialogues in which Socrates figured prominently. Xenophon also wrote of Socrates in his works, including *Apology*, *Oeconomicus*, and *Memorabilia*.

PLATO

One of the most influential philosophers of the Western world, Plato formulated an ethical ideal of absolute reality, theorized about the nature of moral government, and founded one of the most acclaimed institutions of learning in human history.

Plato was born ca. 427 BCE in Athens, one of the most powerful cities of ancient Greece. His birth name was Aristocles, but in his youth he was given the nickname Plato ("broad"), which referred to his athletic countenance.

While still a young man, Plato met a teacher who would have a fundamental impact on his life, Socrates. It is through Plato that historians have their information about that man, for Socrates himself left no writings. Socrates was a charismatic philosopher who taught his students that "the unquestioned life is not worth living." Plato became a formal student of Socrates in 409, although Plato was away from Athens for extensive periods between 409 and 404 BCE, when he served in the Athenian military during the Peloponnesian War against Sparta.

When he returned to Athens, Plato briefly joined the oligarchy of the Thirty Tyrants, of which his maternal uncle, Charmides, was a prominent member. Plato quickly grew disillusioned with the violence of the tyranny, and he left the group. Between 403 and 399, Plato was an active participant in the school of Socrates and dreamed of a life of politics in the restored Athenian democracy. However, in 399, Socrates was convicted of treason by the Athenians and sentenced to death, merely on the basis of his attitudes and teachings. Socrates' death turned Plato away from democracy and led him on a path of philosophical inquiry that would forever change Western ethical and political thought.

For the next several years, Plato traveled extensively and visited many cities in Greece, Egypt, Sicily, and the Italian Peninsula. While in Italy, Plato learned Pythagorean mathematics, which led him to see that particular discipline as the most precise form of human reason. At some time between 399 and 387, Plato reentered the military and received decorations of bravery. He may also have experienced a period of captivity by pirates. Finally, in 387, Plato returned to his native city of Athens. In Athens, Plato continued to be dismayed by the state of politics and decided to establish his Academy around 387. Plato's goal for the Academy was that it would be a place where men would be educated in the ideals of statecraft that Plato was formulating. He aspired to create a class of rulers who would be just in their treatment of the Athenians and reject the mob mentality common in democracy, which was best represented to Plato by the unjust conviction of Socrates.

Plato's philosophies were written as a series of 30 dialogues. They contained dynamic language and were deceptively simple in their coherence but dense in their content. One of Plato's most valuable contributions comes in his discussion of forms. He argued that human perceptions were faulty and that the senses were unreliable; nevertheless, he believed that ideal forms contained the essence of every thing and could be mathematically determined through the intellect. Plato's respect for mathematics was immense. Indeed, the sign over the door of the Academy read, "No one unversed in geometry may enter." His works became the foundation for Euclidean mathematics, particularly in regard to systems of proofs.

In his dialogues, Plato made clear his belief that human reason and knowledge should be perfected for the betterment of the soul. He was concerned with morality and ethics for social reasons; in *The Republic*, he expresses a belief that philosophers equipped with knowledge should be allowed to rule over the masses, who lived in ignorance. Plato sought to make the graduates of his Academy the philosopher-kings of which he dreamed.

Plato was also concerned with functions of nature and believed that all heavenly bodies rotated in perfect spheres, an idea that influenced astronomers until the era of Johannes Kepler. In his scientific pursuits, however, Plato was careful not to acquire knowledge for its own sake. Instead, he believed that the intellect must be perfected in order for a person to be moral and just. Knowledge gained but not implemented in that ethical pursuit was an abomination.

Once the Academy was established, Plato apparently did not travel much, aside from a period of employment as the tutor of Dionysius the Younger, tyrant of Syracuse, in 367. Plato hoped that the king would rule like his ideal philosopher, but he was sorely disappointed and returned home within a year. He remained as the director of the Academy until his death in 347 BCE.

The Academy went on to stand as the foremost institution of education in the region until it was shut down in 529 CE. After nine centuries, the Byzantine emperor Justinian I, calling it a pagan abomination in the now-Christian realm, closed the institution. The Academy produced many fine scholars, including Plato's student Aristotle, and stands as one of the longest-lasting schools in human history.

ARISTOTLE:

Aristotle is considered the greatest scientist and one of the greatest philosophers of the ancient world. A student of [Plato](#), Aristotle was the teacher of [Alexander the Great](#) and the founder of the [Peripatetic school](#) of thought. His vast writings include *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Poetics*. Aristotle was one of the first empirical thinkers, though he generally relied on established methods of science: observation, collection and categorization of specimens, analysis of data, induction, and deduction.

Aristotle was born in 384 [BCE](#) in the small town of Stagira in Thrace, a primitive outpost of Greek culture east of [Macedonia](#). Aristotle, seeking to follow in his father's footsteps as a scientist and physician, journeyed south to Athens in 366. He studied at the [Academy](#), Plato's school in Athens, where he became that philosopher's most famous student. At the Academy, Aristotle fit in as a wealthy [aristocrat](#), but his [Thracian](#) and Macedonian background plagued him among condescending [Athenians](#). In the end, Aristotle's superior intellect silenced all criticism.

From Plato, Aristotle learned of the universal truth, which [Socrates](#) termed "the Good." Plato taught his students at the Academy that the best means to approach an understanding of truth was through reason, the study of mathematics and music, intuition, and intense and deep contemplation.

Upon Plato's death, Aristotle journeyed to a small kingdom in [Asia Minor](#) (present-day Turkey) where he became court philosopher to King Hermias. Aristotle married the king's daughter but soon fled (with his wife) upon the tragic assassination of the king. Aristotle ended up back in Macedonia in 343, this time as tutor to the royal prince Alexander (Alexander the Great).

Alexander eventually became king of Macedonia in 336 upon his father's assassination and then spent the next 13 years of his life conquering [Greece](#), [Asia Minor](#), [Palestine](#), [Egypt](#), [Iran](#), [Iraq](#), and [Afghanistan](#)—all of which made up the [Persian Empire](#). In the meantime, Aristotle had left Macedonia for Athens, where he opened his school, the [Lyceum](#).

Aristotle is perhaps best known today as a logician. He created a system of thought based on fundamental assumptions that one cannot doubt—the famous a priori truths. Whereas Plato believed that one must accomplish knowledge of truth by means of reason and intuition, Aristotle believed that the philosopher must observe particular phenomena to arrive at an understanding of reality, a scientific technique known as induction. Once truth is known through induction from the particular to the universal, the philosopher can engage in the process of deduction from the basis of the universal to arrive at other particular truths. Aristotle's system of logic is known as syllogism.

Aristotle also made contributions in metaphysics, the study of reality that transcends the physical world. Aristotle's treatise on natural science was *Physics*. Natural science, he wrote, is concerned with physical movement from the first principles of nature. Aristotle's categorizations had a profound impact on the formation of a vocabulary of science. His notion of type or class is the basis for the notion that a species in nature comprises a set genus. In addition, Aristotle was one of the first students of the human psyche. He wrote treatises on dreams, memory, the senses, prophecy, sleep, and the soul. In zoological studies, Aristotle's contributions included the treatises *Description of Animals*, *Parts of Animals*, and *Generation of Animals*. In *Parts of Animals* In the study of ethics, Aristotle dealt with the question of how the ultimate basis of behavior, the set of rules that establishes the Good, can be understood according to science. Aristotle believed that the tools of science—observation, categorization, logic, and induction—could be brought to bear on the study of human behavior.

The Greek philosophers before and during Aristotle's time were the first political scientists. Aristotle's contribution, *Politics*, applied his philosophical methods and assumptions to the understanding of statecraft. Aristotle argued, based on his experience at Athens, that slavery was justified because of the inferior intellect of slaves. Likewise, he assumed that women lacked the cognitive abilities of males and therefore should not participate in [democracy](#). In *The Athenian Constitution*, Aristotle provided a detailed analysis of [Athenian democracy](#), providing details into the life and political science of the great Athenian lawgiver [Solon](#).

In the study of astronomy, Aristotle explored his ideas in *On the Heavens*. Based on observation, Aristotle established the spherical nature of the earth. Viewing a lunar eclipse, Aristotle detected a slight curvature of the shadow of the earth on the moon's surface. Aristotle's ideas were advocated and defended for centuries after the philosopher's death. Aristotle's disciples were known by the master's teaching style of walking about while engaged in discussion or disputation (from which the name "Peripatetic" derives). [Theophrastus](#) took over the helm of the Lyceum, Aristotle's school at Athens. He organized Aristotle's papers and writings and pursued Aristotle's theories and investigations in the physical and metaphysical worlds. After Theophrastus's death in 287 BCE, Strato assumed leadership of the Lyceum and the Peripatetic philosophers.